

Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust

Stress at Work Toolkit

Department/Service	Human Resources
Accountable Director	Chief People Officer
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1. Introduction

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) defines work-related stress as:

'The adverse reaction people have to excessive pressures or other types of demand placed on them'. Employees feel stressed when they can't cope with pressures and other issues placed upon them.

Workplace stress can be caused by an organisational issue rather than any fault or failure of an individual, and it develops because a person is unable to cope with the excessive demands or pressures being placed upon them. It is not in itself an illness, but physical or mental health issues may subsequently develop if excessive stress is not addressed.

It is recognised that a certain level of stress is part of all our work life, and it can help to motivate people and boost their energy and performance levels. However, when the demands from the working environment exceed a person's ability to cope or control, it becomes a negative rather than a positive force. People can feel stressed when there are too few demands on them, when they are bored, undervalued, bypassed, or under-stimulated. Stress is not a medical condition, but research shows that prolonged exposure to stress is linked to poor mental health, such as anxiety and depression.

Ultimately, any part of the human body can be affected by exposure to long-term stress or as a result of a sudden traumatic event, which causes harm or damage. Stress-related ill health can present itself in many ways, including physical and psychological health problems or changes in social interaction or ability at work.

The NICE guidance centres on interventions to promote mental wellbeing through healthy working conditions. The recommendations for NHS organisations include:

- promoting a culture of participation, equality and fairness that is based on open communication and inclusion
- using frameworks such as Health and Safety Executive (HSE) management standards for work-related stress to promote and protect employee mental wellbeing
- considering flexible working arrangements

The Trust has developed its Health & Wellbeing Offer for colleagues which is available through the Well-being Matters Pinwheel on the Intranet. This includes support available for psychological well-being.

The Trust will use information from the annual Staff Opinion Survey, monitoring of sickness absence records, Occupational Health and counselling referrals, as well as Managers' reports to actively identify workplace stressors and develop action plans to reduce risks and prevent harm.

2. Scope

It is a requirement of the Trust to identify and eliminate, as far as reasonably practicable, the possibility or likelihood of events that may, over a period of time or as a one-off, cause colleagues' mental health to be affected. If the risk cannot be eliminated, then it must be either reduced or sufficiently controlled and monitored. The Trust's approach is to raise awareness of the potential causes and signs of stress and to support individual colleagues and managers in identifying where particular support may help someone to avoid harmful effects on their physical and mental wellbeing. This toolkit aims to provide managers with sufficient information to confidently assess, review, and support colleagues who may be demonstrating signs of stress.

3. Responsibility and Duties

The Trust Board has legal responsibility for all Trust policies and supporting documents and for ensuring they are suitable and sufficient for achieving their needs.

The Trust has a duty of care under The Health and Safety at Work, etc. Act 1974 to:

- Identify all workplace stressors and conduct risk assessments to eliminate stress or control the risks associated with stress. These risk assessments will be regularly reviewed.
- Consult with Trade Union Safety Representatives on all proposed actions relating to the prevention of workplace stress.
- Guidance and support will be available for all managers and supervisory staff in stress management.
- Provide confidential counselling for colleagues affected by stress caused by either work or external factors.

3.1 The Chief People Officer

The Chief People Officer is responsible for the overall publication and distribution of the Stress at Work policy and all associated documents.

3.2 Managers

People management requires a particular set of skills, one element of which is the ability to demonstrate insight and understanding of the impact of stress upon individuals. Managers should strive to promote and maintain positive mental health and reduce stress.

Supportive management behaviour plays a crucial role in reducing stress, as colleagues look to managers for approval, appreciation, and information. This is particularly important during times of organisational change.

Managers/supervisors should:

- Offer regular Wellbeing Conversations to colleagues, recognising the supportive and preventative value of these as a space to address any difficulties and avert escalation of these.
- Offer colleagues the opportunity to have these confidential Wellbeing Conversations, either with yourself, another line manager or a Wellbeing Conversation Facilitator.

- For colleagues who may be experiencing work-related stress, encourage them to complete an Employee Self-Assessment to help identify the stressors or risk factors. Then, utilise the Manager's Conversation guide to discuss and agree on any actions to remove or reduce these stressors/risks.
- Ensure effective and open communication with colleagues, particularly where there are organisational and procedural changes.
- Promptly investigate any reported incidents of stress.
- Conduct annual Workplace Risk Assessments, ensuring workplace stress is reviewed thoroughly and appropriately. Provide a copy of the completed assessment to the Health and Safety Department. (Contact the Health and Safety Department for the latest version of the Workplace Risk Assessment document).
- All Managers are encouraged to self-assess themselves at least annually using the HSE Stress Management Competency Indicator Tool <https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/mcit.htm>.
- Be familiar with relevant guidance to help understand the negative impact of stress and how to manage stress-related issues.
- Ensure that bullying and harassment is not tolerated.
- Monitor the impact of stress on themselves and their colleagues, e.g., by discussing stress with colleagues and reviewing sickness absence data.
- Monitoring Workload, working time and overtime to ensure that colleagues are not overloaded.
- Monitoring holidays to ensure colleagues are taking their entitlement
- Demonstrate the ability to identify situations where workplace stress has the potential to harm colleagues.
- Be vigilant and offer additional support to a colleague who is experiencing stress outside of work, such as bereavement.
- Assess the potential for modifying working patterns and methods to mitigate the adverse effects of stress.
- Cooperate with Trust-wide initiatives to audit and monitor potential stressors, assisting in identifying vulnerable staff groups and encouraging colleagues to participate in local and national staff surveys.

3.3 Health and Safety Team

- Provide guidance and support for managers in implementing and conducting risk assessments.
- Report any stress-related concerns raised within the department's annual Workplace Risk Assessment at the quarterly Health and Safety Committee meetings.
- Inform the Trust Board and the Health and Safety Committee of any changes and developments related to stress at work.

3.4 Health and Safety Committee

- The Health and Safety Committee will participate in monitoring the Stress at Work Policy.
- The Health and Safety Committee chair will report to the Trust Management Board (TMB) on any significant risks or findings raised within the Committee in relation to Stress at Work.

3.5 Human Resources

The HR Advisory Team will provide guidance and act as an internal resource within the Trust, providing advice to managers and supporting colleagues who are experiencing difficulties due to work pressures.

This may include:

- Facilitating access to detailed information about causes and levels of sickness absence, turnover and staff engagement (from staff surveys) to help managers closely report issues.
- Liaising with Occupational Health and other external agencies to provide confidential support.
- Facilitate sickness absence management training for managers, which incorporates guidance on how to support colleagues who may be experiencing stress.

3.6 Occupational Health

The Occupational Health Department will be responsible for:

- Provide specialist advice and support stress awareness training where appropriate.
- Supporting Human Resources, Health and Safety and Training and Development Department in the training of managers regarding stress management and risk assessment.
- Assessing colleagues who self-refer or are referred by their line managers due to concerns about their well-being, or stress-related sickness absence. Appointments are usually provided within 10 working days, and all referrals are triaged by a senior nurse.
- Providing such colleagues with support and confidential counselling. Colleagues can access this service 24/7.

3.7 Trade Union Representatives

- Advising and supporting colleagues regarding the application of policies, including Stress at Work.
- Monitoring and reviewing the effectiveness of the Stress at Work policy in partnership with HR and managers to ensure that processes are applied fairly and transparently.
- Working in partnership with managers to support improvements in colleague health, safety and wellbeing.
- Demonstrate a positive approach to tackling stress in the workplace.

3.8 Mental Health First Aiders

- Providing confidential, face-to-face, emotional support to colleagues experiencing feelings of distress or despair, and, when appropriate, signposting and providing continued support if necessary.

3.9 Staff Psychological Wellbeing Service

- Acknowledging the reciprocal relationship between stress and psychological distress, the service provides a safe and confidential space for colleagues to check in with their psychological wellbeing and to discuss any additional support they may need. This could include advice, signposting to sources of support, or offering short-term, evidence-based therapies.

4. Health and Safety Executive (HSE) Stress Management Standards

The Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 dictates that every employer has a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, the health, safety and welfare of their workforce.

Under the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations (1999), employers have a duty to assess the health and safety risks associated with colleagues, including the assessment of workplace stress.

The HSE stress Management Standards have been developed to encourage organisations to assess workplace stress proactively (Refer to Appendix A for more information).

The Trust, as far as reasonably practicable, will adhere to these standards and, in so doing, minimise stress within the workplace.

The HSE management standards focus on the following six key areas:

1. **Demands:** such as workload, work patterns and the work environment.
2. **Control:** such as how much say the person has in the way they do their work.
3. **Support:** such as the encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the organisation, line management and colleagues.
4. **Relationships:** such as promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour.
5. **Role:** such as whether people understand their role within the organisation and whether the organisation ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles.
6. **Change:** such as how organisational change is managed and communicated in the organisation.

5. Detecting early signs of stress

Stress can present itself in many ways, including physical symptoms, changes in normal behaviour and emotional symptoms. These can develop into health conditions, including depression and anxiety, heart disease and irritable bowel syndrome.

The following characteristics, especially when combined, may indicate that an individual is experiencing stress:

- High levels of sickness absence (deteriorating attendance and regular bouts of recurring illness).
- Increased accidents/incidents.
- Increased disputes/grievances/conflicts with colleagues.
- Noticeable reduction in performance levels.
- Poor decision-making/increased errors.
- Erratic timekeeping.
- Loss of motivation and commitment.
- Incidents of violence at work.

The following are just some of the effects stress might have on individuals:

- **Emotional effects:** anxiety, anger, frustration, moodiness, irritability, loss of pleasure and interest, despair, depression and impaired sleep, negative thoughts, increased anxiety, increased alertness, unnecessary guilt, panic, mood swings, overreactions.
- **Physical effects:** tenseness and musculoskeletal problems, nervous speech, headaches, tiredness, appetite disturbance (under / overeating), light headaches, weakened immune system (leading to frequent infections), raised blood pressure, palpitations, chest pain, stomach cramps, nausea.
- **Psychological effects:** impairment of perception, concentration, memory, judgement, decision making, accuracy, motivation and creativity (thinking, feeling, doing), depression, generalised anxiety disorders and presentation of acute and chronic trauma responses (unwanted and intrusive thoughts about a distressing experience and feeling 'on edge').
- **Social effects:** relationships may be more difficult, withdrawing/not wanting to socialise, increased alcohol, nicotine or drug intake, under or overeating, becoming accident-prone, working longer hours, not taking breaks, no longer having time for leisure activities.
- **Behavioural effects:** being short-tempered, aggressive or compulsive, crying.

6. Workplace factors that have the potential to cause stress

It is everyone's responsibility to escalate concerns regarding the following:

- **Work Overload**
 Stress is more likely to occur when there is a loss of control in managing demand, typically due to excessive workload pressure. Managers need to understand their team's workload and the strengths of their team and individuals within their roles, so they can effectively allocate tasks. They need to support colleagues in prioritising their tasks and develop a culture where they feel confident in raising concerns about workload. They should encourage supportive teamwork, review, and reduce unnecessary paperwork and administration. It should also be recognised that frequently asking individuals to work in unfamiliar situations may impact upon their health and wellbeing.
- **Poor Equipment, Facilities and Resources**
 Not having the right tools, facilities or resources for the job is something that heightens stress, particularly when people are busy. Managers need to ensure that colleagues have the right equipment and that it is adequately maintained. Where faults occur, they need to communicate this to the team with an update of when they will be repaired and what should happen in the meantime.
- **Difficult Work-Life Balance**
 Where work may be impacting an individual's home life, e.g. preventing someone from leaving on time to care for a dependent, this can impact levels of stress. Managers should not insist on challenging timescales where they are not necessary and should monitor their colleagues' working hours and forward plan accordingly. They should

empower colleagues to feel confident about raising questions and concerns around unreasonable deadlines.

- **Violence and Aggression (physical and non-physical)**

Colleagues are likely to have less resilience if they are subjected to work behaviour that undermines their sense of value and self-worth. The Trust will have a zero-tolerance approach to violence towards colleagues. Managers should ensure that colleagues are aware of the Violence Prevention, Reduction, and Management of Violence and Aggression Policy and the Dignity at Work Policy and provide conflict resolution training as necessary. Where behaviour from members of the public falls below the expected standards, colleagues should escalate those concerns, and the Trust will deal with these in line with relevant policies to protect colleagues.

Where sanctions are issued to perpetrators, e.g., patients, the Trust will communicate this to colleagues to ensure they feel they have control over the work environment.

Immediate support should be offered to all colleagues following a stressful event, and managers and colleagues should be fully aware of the actions to take if a colleague is experiencing difficulties, including following the flowchart for Staff Support debriefing following a traumatic event. Details regarding this support are available on the Intranet under the “Supporting Colleagues Involved in Traumatic, Stressful Incidents and Complaints Policy”.

7. Top tips for supporting colleagues who are experiencing stress

Managers can have a positive influence on a colleague's well-being and may be able to actively help reduce the stress their colleagues may be experiencing:

- **Back to basics**

Promote the value of investing in self-care. Support colleagues in recognising their behaviours by encouraging them to integrate acts of self-care into their day which can help alleviate rising stress levels. Some suggestions could be to encourage colleagues to connect with friends or loved ones, go for meals, listen to music, try to eat and drink sensibly, reduce caffeine and alcohol consumption, set reasonable deadlines, and prioritise and delegate tasks where possible.

For colleagues who may be faced with difficult circumstances at work, feel stressed or anxious, and need some time alone to recharge, they should be encouraged to utilise the Staff Wellbeing and Relaxation Rooms available across the Trust.

- **Clearly Signpost**

Ensure colleagues are aware of the help and support services available. Ensure that signposting is available in various mediums, such as leaflets, posters, and flyers.

- **Supportive Management Behaviour**

This includes providing feedback and communicating openly about actions and decisions taken, utilising the knowledge, skills and experience of colleagues, considering how to protect colleagues from competing demands, carrying out high-

quality appraisals, providing development opportunities, leading by example, and being aware of colleagues' health and wellbeing.

Encourage colleagues to maintain boundaries between work and home, encourage them to avoid regularly working late or taking work home and encourage colleagues to utilise their holiday entitlement in a planned way.

- **Positive working relationships**

This includes ensuring that managers are aware of the true value of effective teamwork and the impact organisational change can have on performance, team development, applying policies fairly and consistently, communicating effectively and personally rather than relying on email, and being aware of the impact of their behaviour on others.

Encourage peer support in the form of an allocated buddy and consider fostering team togetherness with team huddles, providing colleagues with the opportunity to pause, reflect, and collaboratively work through any issues.

- **Positive contribution**

It is recognised that having information and feedback is central to a feeling of well-being at work. This includes ensuring that appraisals are carried out and maintaining a balance between praise and constructive criticism or feedback. Good managers will share positive feedback and customer/client satisfaction with colleagues. They will also ensure that any challenge is put across constructively – a culture of “courteous challenge”.

- **Participation/being kept informed**

Colleagues should have regular updates on key issues and regular feedback. This can be achieved through regular team meetings, where views can be shared, questions asked and responded to, and feedback from staff surveys shared so that colleagues can see how this has benefited them. Additionally, it ensures that colleagues are informed about developments first, rather than hearing about them from other sources within or outside the organisation.

The following link may also help provide managers with sufficient information and confidence to proactively manage stress at work within their areas of control:
<https://www.hse.gov.uk/stress/assets/docs/stress-talking-toolkit.pdf>.

8. Exploring adjustments with colleagues

Adjustments to the workplace may be helpful for colleagues experiencing stress or returning to work following a stress-related absence. Colleagues and managers may wish to consider the options below to support them.

Occupational Health may recommend Reasonable Adjustments if a colleague has a condition that may be considered under the Equality Act (2010). Occupational Health will be able to provide advice and guidance regarding reasonable adjustments for colleagues. Managers

should consider whether these adjustments are possible to implement, and if not, discuss alternatives with Occupational Health. Examples of reasonable adjustments might include:

- A phased return to work – possibly on reduced hours building up (usually over a 4-week period).
- Looking at aspects of the job that the person finds particularly stressful and temporarily reassigning them or sharing them.
- Adjusting the content of the job temporarily.
- Allowing the colleague greater control over how they plan and manage their time or workload.
- Discussing time off for attending therapeutic sessions, treatment, assessment and/or rehabilitation.
- Changing shift patterns, or exploring different flexible working options such as part-time, job share, annualised hours.
- Altering start and finish times to avoid rush hour or to enable them to plan medication regimes, etc.
- Consider what adjustments could be made to the physical environment, such as reducing noise levels, etc.
- Offer a quiet place where they can go for a time out if they are feeling anxious or stressed, such as the Staff Wellbeing and Relaxation Rooms.
- Providing support to develop skills if identified as a training need.
- Signposting to outside organisations.
- Signposting to support using the Health & Wellbeing Pinwheel on the Trust Intranet.
- Transferring temporarily or permanently to another role within the Trust, another site, or another department, where returning to their old job may be a barrier to the colleague's return.

9. Employee Self-Assessment, Managers Conversation Guide and Workplace Risk Assessment

The Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 require all employers to assess the nature and scale of risks to health and safety in the workplace, and to remove, or if not reasonably practical, reduce the impact of all potential hazards.

Once aware of an individual feeling stressed at work, a manager should promptly discuss this with the individual by holding a **Wellbeing Conversation** and where colleagues are identifying that work is causing them to feel stressed or overwhelmed, managers should encourage colleagues to complete an **Employee Self-Assessment** to help them to pinpoint the factors that may be contributing to them feeling this way. The Employee Self-Assessment incorporates the six areas which have been identified to contribute to workplace stress: demand, control, role, relationships and change, and also looks to address if there are any other aspects of work or factors outside of work which may be contributing. Following this, Managers can utilise the **Managers Conversation Guide** to further explore the issues that have been raised and to discuss what support is available. The aim is to identify possible actions that could be taken to help the individual deal with the problem and potentially resolve the situation. Managers may wish to seek support from the HR Advisory Team or Occupational Health if they feel this would be beneficial. Following the conversation, managers may look to arrange a follow-up meeting with the colleague as a follow-up discussion to explore whether any actions have proved useful, whether any further issues may have arisen and whether any

additional support is required. Follow-up review meetings will be particularly important for cases involving ongoing stress. When a manager receives personal information, the individual's right to privacy must be respected. If a manager is concerned about the number of colleagues experiencing workplace stress in their area or noticing specific themes, they may wish to contact the Health and Safety Team and their HR Business Partner for further advice.

Managers will identify potential stressors as part of their annual departmental risk assessments. All colleagues may experience periods of pressure at work, and short periods of pressure are not necessarily a cause for concern but should be noted. It is the risk from sustained and/ or excessive pressure, without the opportunity to recover, that needs to be assessed, and measures put in place to control the risk of adverse effects. Issues that cannot be resolved at the local level or that are deemed to be broader Trust issues should be addressed through consultation with HR, the Health and Safety Team, Union Representatives, or Occupational Health.

Appendix A HSE Stress Management Standards

The Trust will adhere to the standards of good management in addressing occupational stress, ensuring that management can demonstrate the following points, which are in line with the Health & Safety Executive's Stress Management Standards.

Standard 1: Demands (includes issues such as workload, work patterns and the work environment):

- Employees indicate that they are able to cope with the demands of the job.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
- What should be happening/aims to be achieved.
- The Trust provides employees with adequate and achievable demands in relation to the agreed hours of work.
- People's skills and abilities are matched to the job demands.
- Jobs are designed to be within the capabilities of employees.
- Employees' concerns about their work environment are addressed.

Standard 2: Control (How much say the person has in the way they do their work). The standard states that:

- Employees indicate that they can have a say about the way they do their work.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
- What should be happening/aims to be achieved: where possible, employees have control over their pace of work.
- Employees are encouraged to use their skills and initiative to do their work.
- Where possible, employees are encouraged to develop new skills to help them undertake new and challenging pieces of work.
- The Trust encourages employees to develop their skills.
- Employees have a say over when breaks can be taken.
- Employees are consulted over their work patterns.

Standard 3: Support (includes encouragement, sponsorship and resources provided by the Trust, line management and colleagues). The standard states that:

- Employees indicate that they receive adequate information and support from their colleagues and superiors.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns. What should be happening / aims to be achieved.
- The Trust has policies and procedures to adequately support employees.
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to support their colleagues.
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to support their colleagues.
- Employees know what support is available and how and when to access it.
- Employees know how to access the required resources to do their job.
- Employees receive regular and constructive feedback.

Standard 4: Relationships (includes promoting positive working to avoid conflict and dealing with unacceptable behaviour). The standard states that:

- Employees indicate that they are not subjected to unacceptable behaviours, e.g. bullying at work.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
- The Trust promotes positive behaviours at work to avoid conflict and ensure fairness.
- Employees share information relevant to their work.
- The Trust has agreed policies and procedures to prevent or resolve unacceptable behaviour.
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage managers to deal with unacceptable behaviour.
- Systems are in place to enable and encourage employees to report unacceptable behaviour.

Standard 5: Role (Whether people understand their role within the Trust and whether the Trust ensures that the person does not have conflicting roles). The standard states that:

- Employees indicate that they understand their roles and responsibilities.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
- The Trust ensures that, as far as possible, the differing requirements it places upon employees are compatible.
- The Trust provides information to enable employees to understand their roles and responsibilities.
- The Trust ensures that, as far as possible, the requirements it places upon employees are clear.
- Systems are in place to enable employees to raise concerns about any uncertainties or conflicts they have in their roles and responsibilities.

Standard 6: Change (How organisational change is managed and communicated). The standard states that:

- Employees indicate that the Trust engages them frequently when undergoing an organisational change.
- Systems are in place locally to respond to any individual concerns.
- What should be happening/aims to be achieved.
- The Trust provides employees with timely information to enable them to understand the reasons for proposed changes.
- The Trust ensures adequate employee consultation on changes and provides opportunities for employees to influence proposals.
- Employees are aware of the probable impact of any changes to their jobs. If necessary, employees are given training to support any changes in their jobs.
- Employees are aware of timetables for changes.
- Employees have access to relevant support during changes.

Appendix B Frequently Asked Questions

What do I do if someone is experiencing symptoms of stress as a result of a performance or conduct issue?

Always maintain appropriate contact with the colleague concerned. In the case of performance management, discuss and agree on what help or support they may need to reduce their stress levels. Ensure that any agreements made are implemented and regularly reviewed against targets outlined in the Action Plan. If their performance does not improve despite your intervention, check that there are no underlying health reasons that may be contributing to poor performance (you may need to seek advice from Occupational Health).

If a colleague is facing disciplinary action and then reports sick due to stress, it is important to treat them in accordance with normal sickness procedures. If their absence continues, contact your HR Advisor, who will provide further guidance. This may involve obtaining Occupational Health advice regarding the colleague's fitness for work or attending meetings, the expected length of time for recovery, and whether a speedier conclusion to the disciplinary issue might improve their health. It is not true that in all cases the disciplinary process has to be suspended whilst the colleague is absent due to stress (refer to the Disciplinary Policy). Advice must be obtained from Occupational Health, and the colleague must be informed of the need for the referral.

For colleagues who are suspended from work or have been asked to work under action short of suspension, it may be appropriate to assign them with pastoral support. The person undertaking this role will maintain regular contact with the colleague, providing them with the opportunity to discuss their wellbeing and any further support they may need.

What do I do if the stress is related to a home issue?

Even if stress arises solely from a home or non-work issue, it is still likely to impact a colleague's work. Hold a Wellbeing Conversation with the colleague, showing your concern for their situation and signposting the individual to Health and Wellbeing support available within and outside the Trust.

What if the individual won't talk to their manager because they feel they are the cause of the stress?

If the cause of stress involves a colleague's relationship with their manager, another manager or a more senior manager should initially hold a Wellbeing Conversation with them to determine the best course of action.

What to do if a person reports sick with stress?

When an individual is off sick due to work-related stress, it is important that they are signposted to support services, such as the Counselling service, Occupational Health, or external agencies. Research shows that when individuals are off sick for more than four weeks, it becomes more difficult for them to engage and to return to work. Depending on the individual and the circumstances, an early referral to occupational health is encouraged and the individual should be provided with information regarding support available.

What action should be taken if a colleague reports that they are stressed while absent?

If a colleague is absent as a result of stress, it is important to establish and maintain contact and support as appropriate. If a colleague reports that stress is directly related to their work, steps must be taken to understand why this is the case. If the individual contacts their manager, the manager should attempt to determine the root cause and discuss potential solutions or support, keeping a record of these discussions.

When an individual goes off sick with stress/anxiety, a management referral should be made to Occupational Health to ensure that support is offered at the earliest opportunity.

If there has been no contact from the colleague to discuss their reason for absence and/or no GP certificates have been provided, a letter should be sent by the manager to the colleague, taking advice from the HR Advisory Team.

If the individual remains off sick due to stress or anxiety, this may become a long-term absence (after 4 weeks), and the manager should refer to the Staff Absence, Health and Wellbeing Policy for further guidance or contact your HR Advisor. Occupational Health advice should continue to be sought as appropriate.

The process of contacting and communicating with the colleague may also include considering a home visit, if the colleague is unable to come into their work location or if this would be more supportive for them. These arrangements should be considered in line with the Sickness Absence Policy and consultation with HR. Meetings can also take place in a mutually agreed private offsite location or virtually.

A record of the dates any letters are sent, confirmation that contact has been made, and the details of any agreed outcomes must be kept on the individual's personal file.

What to do if the colleague requests no contact?

Sometimes colleagues do not want to be contacted. Do not accept this at face value and sever all contact with the individual, as evidence clearly shows that this hinders recovery and significantly reduces the chances of a successful return to work. People may request no contact because they feel anxious, embarrassed or ashamed about the way they are feeling. A sympathetic manner and sensitivity to a colleague's difficulties can help overcome this.

Sometimes, a request for no contact can arise because the manager is perceived to have been a contributing factor in the colleague's illness or unwellness. In such circumstances, options could include offering another manager to make contact with the colleague. If there are work issues (real or perceived), it is essential that these are addressed.

What to do when a colleague returns to work after stress related absence

Once notification is received of a proposed return-to-work, a Return-to-Work meeting should be organised by the manager with the colleague.

Advice should already have been sought from Occupational Health to assist you in doing this. A return-to-work plan may include one or more of the following: reduced hours, re-structured workload, temporary adjustment of supervisory or management responsibilities, additional training or support, or a phased return. The individual's progress upon return

must be regularly monitored, reviewed, and managed as required and this should be documented as above.

When a colleague returns from sick leave with stress, the most important thing is for the manager and the team to make them feel welcomed back. Discuss with the colleague to establish what is likely to be most supportive to them. Remember to make sure that the colleague does not return to an impossible workload or an inferior workspace. Take into account, where possible, any reasonable adjustments that the Occupational Health Department have recommended. Set achievable goals that make the colleague feel that they are making progress and be aware that some people may offer to take on too much to prove themselves. Take the time to have frequent informal chats to provide an opportunity for them to express if they feel there are any problems. However, ensure that you do not make the person feel that they are being over-monitored or scrutinised.